

Public Testimony submitted to the Committee on Education of the Connecticut General Assembly regarding Raised Bill 5551, The Commissioner's Network

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As a parent of two children attending Windham Public Schools, I wish to testify regarding the negative effects of the Commissioner's Network. One of my sons was at Windham Middle School when it was admitted into the Network. My husband was on the **Turnaround Committee** that completed a plan for the school, tailored to the needs of our community. Teachers played a crucial role in formulating a plan appropriate for our students, among whom are many bilingual children. Unfortunately, many of the most important features of the plan, such as extended learning time in core subjects and a longer school day to include enrichment in art, music, and academic tutoring, were never funded at adequate levels by the state. In requiring a longer school day but by not paying teachers enough additional salary, Windham teachers (who are among the lowest paid in the state) ended up earning the lowest pay for the longest day. Although the plan specified that additional math teachers and tutors should be hired, this did not occur—at first due to shortages in these areas among job candidates; later due to the state-appointed Special Master's introduction of Teach for America, which brought corps members with no particular specialty and no education background; and, finally, because of the persistent lack of funds.

The goals of the Commissioner's Network appeared to be to circumvent collective bargaining agreements; to hire outside consultants such as Mass Insight; and to increase the amount of time devoted to a bewildering variety of standardized test packages and pilots (some estimate that there are **37 different standardized tests** administered per student in certain grades). During the first two years of Windham Middle School's membership in the Commissioner's Network, teacher, staff, and administrator turnover reached a new high, while student morale and "achievement" declined significantly. At the same time, outside agencies, lobbyists, and others attempted to bring charter schools into the district in order to drain badly needed monies from public schools to private charter management companies and consultants.

I am disheartened and alarmed to see that a bill to expand such a questionable (if not harmful) Network is before the Education Committee. Committee members and legislators should do a more thorough examination of the effects of the interventions, such as on Milner School in Hartford, Curiale in Bridgeport, and Windham Middle School in Windham, for a start. The Committee should also be mindful of the longer history of attempts to waive or suspend laws enacted by our legislature. I am incensed that, if this bill is passed:

Not later than July 1, 2016, the commissioner shall identify a standard set of waivers from laws that hinder the ability of the Department of Education, or its designee, to effectively implement the provisions of this subsection in a commissioner's network school.

How can this be legal, let alone moral? Historically, the suspension of law is associated with martial law, and martial law is typically exercised by tyrants and despots. Poor children and children of color already suffer from insufficient academic resources; they attend inadequately maintained school buildings; and they are often taught by the lowest-paid and least experienced teachers. Now the State of Connecticut is going to take the protections of law away from them? Such an outrage is a blatant example of oppression and would never be allowed in wealthier, whiter school districts—nor should it be. Such tactics belong in the annals of history, to which tyranny, slavery, racism, and other forms of oppression should be relegated, for the purposes of study and as negative examples.

My son's school has not been elevated out of poverty, lack of resources, high teacher and staff turnover, and low morale due to its time in the Commissioner's Network. I ask that you, elected representatives, stand with the children of poor communities and, rather than siphon off state monies, **promote researched-based and humane reforms for our schools**. Do not strip poor children and their families of laws and legal protections just because well-funded lobbyists would like you to do so.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Gallucci.